Chapter I

THE COMMUNITY OF BANG CHAN

The Geographical Setting

In the populous flat central plain of Thailand where Bang Chan was located, fenceless geometric rice-fields, dotted by clumps of trees, stretch as far as the eye can see. Houses, clustering occasionally into hamlets, line the canals that serve for domestic use, drainage, irrigation and communication. A few rounded-up roads lead out from Bangkok, the national capital on the Menam Chao Phraya, the great central river.

The monsoon divides the year into three seasons: a hot and wet (late May through November); a cool and dry (December to mid-February); and a hot and dry (late February to mid-May). The temperatures range annually from 59° to 89° F. (15° to 32° C.) with monthly means of 77° to 86° F. (25° to 30° C.) (de Young:5). A drop at night averages around 18° F. (10° C.) in April, and 22° F. (12° C.) in January, while the relative humidity varies between 65 per cent and 81 per cent (Hauck, et al.:12). Rainfall averages about 50 inches a year, 40 of which fall in the wet season (Janlekha:21). Because of the run-off from the mountains in the north, once a year the Menam Chao Phraya slowly rises, fills the canals and then overflows its banks, covering the plain for hundreds of miles to a depth of three feet or more. In Bang Chan, the water stood on the land from June until January, with its peak in October. From February to May the canals ran low, and the land dried and cracked from the intense heat.

The Community

In 1954, 1700 persons (336 families) lived in Bang Chan. Muslims, comprising 10 per cent of the population, lived as fully Thai citizens in all parts of the community in economic and social symbiosis with Buddhists. A few ethnic Chinese had married into Thai families and were accepted.

The community spread over an area of about 7000 rai (1000 hectares or 4 square miles). Bang Chan Canal bisected

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132 Bangkok. The tropical monsoon climate divides the year into three seasons, a hot, wet season from late May to November, a cooler, dry season from December to early February, and a hot, 361 dry season from late February to mid-May. The community, scattered over an area of approximately five square miles, was 161 composed of seven neighboring hamlets. In 1954, the population 162 was approximately 1700, divided among 336 households. About 60 per cent of the households were made up of independent families, parents with unmarried children, with an average family [463] size of 5.7 persons. The main occupation of 80 per cent of all families was rice farming.

243 The climate together with the overflowing Chao Phraya [13] river, provided natural conditions for raising a single crop [221] of wet rice. From May or June to February, the principal activities were those connected with rice production. This crop greatly exceeded the needs for local consumption as human food, [433] feed, and seed. The surplus of rice which was sold, was estimated for 1953 as 1.4 times the amount used for all purposes within the village (Janlekha, 1955).

346 Wat Bang Chan, the Buddhist monastery and place for re- 621 ligious exercises, was also the center of social life in the [795] community. When data for this study were being gathered, the one primary school in the village was located on the grounds of the wat. The community was defined simply by the clientele which patronized Wat Bang Chan and this elementary school. [563] Within the area of the community lived a small minority of Thai Moslems who patronized a mosque and school just outside Bang Chan. The few Chinese in the village were considered as part of the Thai-Buddhist community. Information to be presented [028] on food habits refers primarily to habits of the Buddhist majority, although some reference will be made to ways in which Moslem practices differed therefrom.

139 Although for six or more months of the year the fields 243 were covered with water, sometimes to a depth of a meter or 491 more, a year-round road, connecting Bangkok and Minburi, the 484 nearest market town, ran through one edge of the village. Bus 487 service was available along this road, to either Bangkok or [494] Minburi but within the community one went by boat on the network of canals during the wet season, and during the dry season, [503] on foot along the dikes or across fields. From late January through May, when subsidiary canals were apt to be dry, getting about was somewhat difficult. Boat travel was considered easy, but as many families had only one boat, a trip to the store or even to a neighbor's home had to be planned with reference to the activities of other family members.

443 Large scale purchases, as for a ceremony, were always made at a big market, but in general, instead of people going to the market-town, the "market" came to the people. Boat-venders brought not only fresh produce and staples but also sweets, ices, soft drinks, and cooked foods such as Chinese

4:Phillips E-4,5 (1956-1957) 1966
AO7 Central Thai AO7
Bang Chan
Thailand AO1

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The Village of Bang Chan

Geographical and Cultural Setting

The heartland of Siam is the Mɛɛnaam or Caw Phrajaa Valley, a vast alluvial plain stretching out for some 250 miles north of the Gulf of Thailand and the capital city of Bangkok, where approximately 40 percent of the nation's 26.3 million persons (1960) live.[1] This Central region is distinguished geographically, and to a lesser extent culturally, from the three other major areas of Thailand: the North, a forested mountain area dominated by Chiengmai, Thailand's second largest city, and in whose outer reaches live many of the tribal peoples of Siam; the Northeast, a broad plateau region which is the largest and economically poorest area of the country; and the South, or Peninsular Thailand, a jungle and mountain area where the heaviest concentration of Thai Malay-Moslems live.

The community of Bang Chan is located some 31 kilometers northeast of Bangkok on what is essentially a flat, seemingly endless rice field, broken occasionally by tall Asiatic pines, strings of houses along canals, or clumps of trees shielding some isolated homesteads. A person seeing Bang Chan for the first time is struck particularly by the intense green of the landscape and, once off the macadam road that connects the village to Bangkok and to the market town of Minburi four kilometers to the east, the stillness of the setting, even along the thickly populated main canal where voices are muffled by the heavy foliage surrounding each house. Often in the early hours of the afternoon the only sound that one can hear in Bang Chan is the dip of the paddles of boats moving up the canal or the barking of dogs.

[1] There is no general agreement on the precise boundaries of the Mɛɛnaam Valley. Zimmerman (1931), Andrews (1935), Blanchard *et al.* (1958), and most Thai government documents use the term synonymously with "Central region," which would include the provinces east and southeast of Bangkok to the Cambodia frontier, west to the Burma border, and north of the Gulf of Thailand. Credner (1935) and deYoung (1955) on the other hand limit the term to only that portion of the Central region which falls north of Bangkok, equivalent to what Pendleton (1962) calls the "Bangkok Plain." Our population figure refers to the former usage.